



UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA - REDUCING STUDENT INDEBTEDNESS

Presentation to Legislative Staff. At the invitation of the University of Northern Iowa, a group of legislative staffers visited the campus on August 9, 2016, to learn about a variety of programs and initiatives. Jim Wohlpart, Interim President, welcomed the visitors to the campus and led a presentation on the UNI's efforts to increase student retention, improve on-time completion rates, and help students reduce their indebtedness.

Live Like a Student. The attendees received packets of materials that are given to first-year students as part of the Live Like a Student initiative to encourage responsible budgeting and borrowing. The initiative includes a three-week course that consists of six 50-minute noncredit classes that cover personal budgeting, use of credit and credit cards, student loans, and identity protection. The courses are not required but are offered at a variety of times throughout the semester to make them accessible to as many students as possible. Students can also obtain personalized budgeting assistance and other one-on-one money management counseling services.

First Year Initiatives. Kristin Michael Woods, Director of Student Success and Retention, and Deirdre Bucher Heistad, Director of Undergraduate Studies, discussed the UNI's initiatives aimed at retention of first-year students. Some initiatives that have been in place since FY 2012 and FY 2013 include:

- First-Year Cornerstone, a year-long general education course that satisfies both the writing and oral communication requirements within the UNI's Liberal Arts Core. The class enrollments are small, and students remain with the same professor and peer mentor throughout their first year.
- First-Year Only (FYO) Liberal Arts Core Courses offer students the opportunity to take at least several FYO courses in their freshman year. Transfer students and students entering UNI with significant credits from high school dual enrollment are required to take at least one FYO course in their first year.
- Course Embedded Peer Mentoring Program that puts peer mentors into required general education classes to provide assistance and guidance to first-year students.
- The Mapworks System that surveys students about their transition to college to identify specific issues of concern.

More recent initiatives include Transfer-Only Peer Mentoring, an extended orientation called UNI NOW, Success Coaching for students identified as at risk of not completing their first year, and supportive seminars in the first-year humanities courses that have been identified as the most difficult first-year courses.

Retention Success. The four-year graduation rate for First-Year Cornerstone participants is 5.0% higher than a comparison group. Students participating in the FYO courses are retained at a rate 6.0% to 8.0% higher than other first-year students, and had significantly higher perceived communication skills, skills that significantly predicted first-year retention.

Lowering Student Debt. Joyce Morrow, Director of Financial Aid and Scholarships, and Tim Bakula, Associate Director of Financial Aid, presented information on the Office of Financial Aid and a variety of statistics related to student indebtedness and default rates. In addition to the Live Like a Student and FYO initiatives, Ms. Morrow and Mr. Bakula highlighted several other financial literacy initiatives, including the use of outreach and marketing tools to connect with students, parent orientation sessions, and three new initiatives:

- Adulting Seminars to help prepare students for financial life after college.
- Financial Peer Coaches specially trained to provide financial coaching to fellow students.
- Transfer Success Counseling, a 30-minute session with a financial aid counselor required for all new transfer students within their first two months at UNI.

Ms. Morrow and Mr. Bakula also discussed efforts to provide counseling to students in regard to the use of private loans. The counseling has been identified as the most significant contributing factor to lowering student debt.

Presentation Materials. The presentations on the [First-Year Only initiatives](#) and the [financial aid initiatives](#) are available on the General Assembly Website.

STAFF CONTACT: Robin Madison (515) 281-5270 robin.madison@legis.iowa.gov